



## Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive DSpace Repository

---

Theses and Dissertations

1. Thesis and Dissertation Collection, all items

---

2003

The USS Greeneville collision: a discussion of crisis communication : a directed research project ...

Surette, J. A. Cappy.

---

<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/11041>

---

This publication is a work of the U.S. Government as defined in Title 17, United States Code, Section 101. Copyright protection is not available for this work in the United States.

*Downloaded from NPS Archive: Calhoun*



<http://www.nps.edu/library>

Calhoun is the Naval Postgraduate School's public access digital repository for research materials and institutional publications created by the NPS community.

Calhoun is named for Professor of Mathematics Guy K. Calhoun, NPS's first appointed -- and published -- scholarly author.

Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School  
411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle  
Monterey, California USA 93943

THE USS GREENEVILLE COLLISION  
A DISCUSSION OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION

A Directed Research Project

Submitted to

THE FACULTY OF THE PUBLIC COMMUNICATION GRADUATE PROGRAM  
SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION  
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY  
WASHINGTON D.C.

In Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

**DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A**

By

Approved for Public Release  
Distribution Unlimited

J. A. "Cappy" Surette

May 2003

**20031114 003**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my beautiful wife, Courtney and our new son, William Xavier, for their tremendous support and patience throughout the thesis writing process. It was a long-road involving many hours of dedicated research that would not have possible without their commitment to me completing this project. For that, I offer my thanks and undying love.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION.....	1
II.	LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
	Crisis Communications.....	5
	Relaying Information Quickly and Establishing Control.....	9
III.	METHODOLOGY.....	11
	Method.....	11
	Case.....	12
	Research Design.....	12
	Limitations.....	13
IV.	ANALYSIS.....	15
	The Navy and Benoit's Image Restoration Techniques.....	15
	Dealing with Perceptions.....	18
	Recovery Efforts.....	21
V.	DISCUSSION .....	23
VI.	CONCLUSION.....	27
	REFERENCES.....	29
	APPENDIX.....	32

## I. INTRODUCTION

Coast Guard, uh, this is, uh, COMSUPAC Pearl Harbor. We have a vessel that has had a collision approximately nine miles south of Diamond Head. A commercial ship with a submarine. Vessel has sunk. Uh, people are in the water. The rough seas may prohibit submarine from . . . .

This distress call announced the collision of a United States Navy submarine with the "Ehime Maru," a Japanese fisheries research and training vessel on Feb. 9, 2001, that left nine Japanese dead. The Ehime Maru was on a fishing and research mission when USS Greeneville (SSN 772) rapidly surfaced and collided with its stern. The submarine was conducting an "emergency ballast tank blow," a procedure used to bring subs to the surface in the event of an emergency, although in this case it was used for training. The Los Angeles-class fast-attack submarine was on a one-day cruise with 16 civilian guests.

The sub immediately alerted search and rescue authorities as soon as the crew realized what happened. United States Coast Guard helicopters and aircraft were on the scene within 40 minutes (Gunder, 2001). Two Navy ships arrived soon after to assist with the rescue.

At the heart of the crisis was the decision of the sub's commanding officer, Navy Commander Scott D. Waddle, to demonstrate the sub's rapid surfacing capability to his civilian guests who were onboard for a one-day cruise. The ship rose rapidly and crashed

into the Japanese boat, which sank within minutes. Descending with it into the 2,000 feet of water below were the bodies of four Japanese fishing students, two teachers and three crewmen. Among the questions of how it occurred was whether 16 civilian visitors aboard the submarine affected the crew's performance. Waddle was immediately reassigned pending the results of an investigation.

A team from the National Transportation Safety Board took the lead in the investigation because it involved a civilian vessel in American waters, but the Navy conducted its own investigation as well. Navy officials said the findings might result in disciplinary measures for Waddle and some of his crewmembers if they somehow violated mandated safety procedures meant to prevent such disasters (Jehl, 2001).

As media and public interest intensified, speculation continued that the ship's officers were somehow distracted by the presence of the 16 civilian guests onboard. Media reports five days after the collision noted that two of the civilian guests were sitting at key watch stations of the sub at the time of the accident. This further roiled public perceptions about the incident, especially in Japan, where officials criticized not only the sinking but also the submarine's perceived failure to help in the rescue.

The Navy announced that Waddle and some of his key officers would face a Court of Inquiry to determine if they might be criminally liable. The results of this investigation would dictate whether or not the officers were recommended to go to a court martial and possibly serve time in prison.

By late April, Admiral Thomas B. Fargo, the U.S. Pacific Fleet commander had reviewed the 119-page court of inquiry report on the accident and found that the former skipper of the USS Greeneville was derelict in his duties and had handled the submarine

hazardously prior to the Feb. 9 collision with the Ehime Maru (Gilmore, 2001). He also found no criminal intent on behalf of the sub's commander. Admiral Fargo chose to forego a court martial, administer nonjudicial punishment, and issue a punitive letter of reprimand to Waddle on April 23. The letter directed Waddle's removal from command of the Greeneville, and ordered him to forfeit half his pay for two months (Kifner, 2001).

While the hearing and verdict ended what had been a promising naval career, Waddle still received an honorable discharge with a pension. Perhaps more importantly, he was spared the ignominy of a humiliating and final court martial and spared time in prison. In making its decision to spare its commander, the Navy risked the wrath of Japan, where the families of those killed by the sub were outraged (CNN.com, April 25, 2001).

The event strained U.S./Japanese relations and triggered a media firestorm as the U.S. Navy's operating procedures were thrust into the media spotlight. The Navy came under fire for numerous aspects of the at-sea collision including questions about how an accident like this could have happened in the first place. Other flashpoints were the apparent lack of rescue efforts by the sub, the presence of civilians on the submarine, and the pending inquiry and trials of the submarine's commanding officer.

This paper will analyze the crisis management performance of the U.S. Navy throughout the crisis.

This study is organized into 6 chapters: Chapter 1 provides an overview of the accident. Chapter 2 is a review of the scholarly literature on crisis communication theory. Chapter 3 provides a methodology for the case study. Chapter 4 analyzes the Navy's crisis communications performance per scholarly theory. Chapter 5 is a

discussion of the U.S. Navy's crisis communication performance. Chapter 6 provides a summary and suggestions for future research.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

To gain a better understanding of the U.S. Navy's crisis communications actions after the submarine collided with the Japanese fishing boat, it is beneficial to review research concerning effective public relations management during times of crisis.

### Crisis Communications

Banks (1996) defines crisis communications as "communication between the organization and its publics prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence. Effective communication can mitigate negative aspects of a crisis and can sometimes bring an organization a more positive reputation than before the crisis."

Understanding that communications was a vital element in almost all successful crisis management efforts, Marra (1998) argues that organizations who communicated poorly during crises often made bad situations worse. The Three Mile Island nuclear power accident, Exxon Valdez oil spill, and the Challenger space shuttle explosion are three well-known examples that demonstrate how inadequate communication strategies can hinder an organization's ability to manage a crisis.

In a similar vein, Fink (1986) states that all crises have the potential to escalate beyond an organization's ability to control them. Additionally, he offers that all crises also risk coming under scrutiny of the media, interfering with normal operations and jeopardizing the positive public image of the organization.

Murphy (1996) takes a different approach using the “chaos theory” as a model for crisis situations whose salient feature is the volatility of public perceptions. She proposes that as a crisis gathers volume and complexity, an organization has the ability to influence events at the onset but loses that power after a certain point of escalation. She offers the Exxon Valdez crisis as an example of an organization missing its window of opportunity to manage a crisis.

As that crisis evolved, it followed a dynamic similar to a chaotic system. After the oil spill off the coast of Alaska, Exxon could have exerted some control over the crisis, but as the company began to face backlash from environmental groups and the U.S. Coast Guard for its poor handling of the situation, it was quickly overwhelmed and lost any hope of controlling the situation. The only option an organization has at that juncture is to allow the events to sort themselves out while attempting to fit into the emerging aftermath. Murphy (1996) argues that during times of crisis, many organizations would opt to take an aggressive stance, but due to the uncertainty and open-endedness involved, the chaos theory sets limits on the purposeful management of volatile issues.

Benoit (1997) identifies two elements necessary for a crisis: that the accused is held responsible for an action and that the act is considered offensive. He also states that the perceptions held by a relevant audience during a crisis are more important than the reality of the situation. The important point is not whether the organization is responsible for the offensive act, but whether relevant audiences believe the organization is at fault. As long as the audience perceives that the organization was at fault, the image is at risk.

Some scholars argue that while each crisis may be unique in some fashion, prior planning may help mitigate the effects of a crisis. Lesly (1991) evaluates crisis communications and states that an effective crisis plan should: establish that an organization will place the welfare of the people involved first; ensure that organization is prepared to be as open as possible about what happened as the facts and conditions permit; give priority to resolving the emergency and protecting people affected; and emphasize that the organization will be fair to all, including critics or opponents who may have instigated the problem.

Burnett (1998) proposed the idea that effective crisis management requires strategic action to avoid or lessen undesirable developments and to bring about a desirable resolution of the crisis event. Moreover, crisis management must be a continuous effort. He states that crisis resolutions have both short-term and long-term ramifications and organizations must be cognizant of both if they are going to provide a permanent and congenial solution to a crisis. He argues that companies such as Union Carbide, Dayco, and Continental Illinois Bank appear to have dealt with their crises with little forethought about the future. In contrast, the rash of hostile takeovers during the 1980s appears to have produced the opposite result. More specifically, Safeway Stores, Continental Airlines, and others were so preoccupied with potential takeovers that they often created immediate crises (e.g. store shutdowns, layoffs) which were just as detrimental.

Benoit (1997) argues that the image restoration theory provides a useful guide for public relations practitioners, critics and educators in developing and critically evaluating messages during a crisis. Benoit's image restoration strategy includes four

recommendations for handling a crisis situation. The first element is to develop a crisis contingency plan and identify who will have overall responsibility. He argues that judicious planning may reduce response time and possibly prevent missteps in an organization's initial crisis response.

Benoit's second recommendation involves identifying relevant audiences and publics during a crisis situation. The author argues that it is imperative to clearly identify and prioritize key audiences and tailor the organization's message in order to appease the most important audiences first.

Benoit's (1997) third recommendation focuses on image repair. He proposes that an organization should communicate corrective or preventative plans they will enact to prevent such a crisis in the future to key publics. He believes that while audiences often want to know who to blame for a crisis, they are often appeased by knowing that steps have been taken to ensure that the potential for a similar calamity have been mitigated or eliminated.

His fourth recommendation deals with the use of image repair discourse and the understanding of persuasive techniques. He recommends that organizations should avoid making false claims; provide adequate support for claims, develop themes throughout a campaign; and avoid arguments that may backfire. He examines the Exxon Valdez crisis and notes that Exxon delivered self-serving statements that conflicted with other information (their allegedly swift and competent cleanup). This perceived conflict may have damaged Exxons' credibility and undermined their arguments.

Benoit also offers five broad categories of image repair strategies to provide tools for organizations during crisis situations. The five categories of image repair strategies

are: denial or shifting the blame; evading responsibility; reducing the offensiveness of the event; and promising corrective action and mortification (confess or beg forgiveness).

### Relying Information Quickly and Establishing Control

Scholars discuss the need for proactive crisis communications early in the life cycle of a crisis. Murphy (1996) states that early intervention in a crisis is at the heart of the chaos theory. She states that public relations practitioners tend to reserve their resources until a pivotal event occurs that could potentially affect public opinion of the organization. Such occurrences include nuclear accidents, product sabotage, takeover attempts and many others. If practitioners act quickly after such events, they can set the agenda and positively influence public perceptions. However, if they do not act quickly, they may not succeed in creating a situation that is congenial to their own organization. She states that Johnson & Johnson's rapid post-Tylenol actions entrenched a consumer-oriented image that resisted erosion during subsequent poisonings, whereas Exxon's post-Valdez inertia served to institutionalize public suspicions of managerial blundering and environmental insensitivity.

Timely and proactive communications during times of crisis can mobilize support, reassure key audiences and show that a company is in control of the situation. Higbee (1992) argues that failing to communicate early will almost ensure that the situation grows and lingers long beyond the direct impact of the initial crisis. It is not uncommon for senior managers to reserve comment until they have all of the facts, but undue delays can be as dangerous as speculation. In most cases, the media will not wait to start reporting the story until the organization is in the spotlight has all the particulars of

the event. Delaying communication is a risky tactic that could be perceived (and reported) as stonewalling by the media.

Some scholars offer that a proactive stance with the media can have the positive effect of limiting how much coverage an organization receives during a crisis. Truitt (1993) states that “Rule Number One” of crisis communications is “tell the media who the source of the information will be, establish credibility for that source, establish when and where the information will be delivered and deliver the news accurately and when promised” (p. 280). He cites the example of the “Wall Street Murder” of 1987, where a stockbroker with Josephthal & Company was shot and killed in the firm’s office in New York’s financial district. He said quick handling of press kept the otherwise big news story confined to only one day’s news cycle.

Seitel (2001) analyzes crisis response after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, and prescribes six courses of action for communicators during a crisis. They are: lead with action; go quickly to the scene of the tragedy; communicate continually; demonstrate humanity; use symbols; and express optimism. He also argues that it is difficult to keep up with changing facts and information during a crisis but communicators should not sit back and wait for all the facts to emerge before communicating.

This paper examines the February 2001 accidental collision between a U.S. Navy submarine with a Japanese fishing vessel. Based upon the literature reviewed, it will answer the following research question: Did the crisis communication strategies used by the Navy effectively deal with the crisis?

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### Method

A case study will be developed to study the U.S. Navy's crisis communications response to the USS Greeneville/Ehime Maru collision.

Wimmer and Dominick (2000) define a case study as a qualitative research design which offers a detailed study or empirical inquiry that uses multiple sources of data to investigate, understand or explain a problem, especially social phenomena. Qualitative research offers descriptive or exploratory analysis of a phenomenon, which does not depend on the measurement of variables. They state that typical sources for case study data are documents, historical artifacts, systematic interviews, direct observations and surveys.

Wimmer and Dominick (2000) offer four characteristics of case study research: particularistic, descriptive, heuristic and inductive. A particularistic case study looks at a particular event or occurrence. A descriptive case study is a comprehensive description of a topic under study. A heuristic case study helps researchers understand what is being studied and an inductive case study endeavors to find new relationships (mostly used in nature). This paper is a descriptive case study.

Newsom, Scott and Turk (1993) state that public relations practitioners use case studies in two ways. First, they may pose a public relations problem and outline possible solutions according to specific guidelines, as suggested by an existing case. Second, they

may dissect a historical case as a learning experience to determine what worked, what didn't and why.

### Case

The collision of the submarine, USS Greeneville with the Japanese fisheries research and training vessel touched off a international media firestorm and strained U.S.-Japanese relations for many months following the mishap. The crisis subsided in October 1999 after the Navy's successful efforts in moving the Ehime Maru from 2,000 feet of water to almost 100 feet so that the bodies of nine fishermen could be safely recovered and delivered back to their families in Japan.

### Research Design

This case study will explore the crisis management performance of the U.S. Navy throughout the USS Greeneville crisis. It will seek to establish whether crisis communication efforts helped assuage the crisis or whether they were unsuccessful in dealing with the crisis. This paper will also explore whether more effective crisis communications could have been used.

To obtain a better understanding of the Navy's crisis communications efforts, Department of Defense and U.S. Navy press release archives were searched looking for references to the accident. Interviews with U.S. Navy public affairs officers involved with crisis communications after the collision were also conducted. Two interviews were conducted on the phone with naval public affairs officers between November 20 and November 23, 2002. One interview was conducted in person on January 24, 2003. Each

interview lasted approximately one hour. One interview was conducted with Navy Lieutenant Commander David Werner who was the public affairs officer for the Commander of the Submarine Force of the United States' Pacific Fleet at the time of the accident. A second interview was conducted with Jon Yoshishige, the civilian media officer for the U.S. Pacific Fleet who was heavily involved with recovery efforts. A third interview was conducted with Commander Conrad Chun who was the media officer U.S. Pacific Fleet during the time of the mishap. (See Appendix I for questionnaire used in the interviews.) By exploring the service's crisis response to the Ehime Maru collision, this paper will attempt to identify its overall crisis strategies.

Relevant articles published by The New York Times between February 10, 2001, and February 28, 2001, were also reviewed. The New York Times was selected due to its national distribution and in-depth reporting on the crisis. The paper has the highest circulation of any seven-day newspaper in America with a circulation of 1.1 million copies on weekdays and 1.7 million copies on weekends (New York Times, 2003). This paper did not review opinion pieces, editorials or letters to the editor. Articles were obtained through searches on Lexis-Nexis and the New York Times website. Searches were conducted using the following search strings: "USS Greeneville," "Scott Waddle" or "Ehime Maru."

### Limitations

The scope of this study is limited to the activities of the United States Navy during this particular situation. Since a case study is a qualitative research methodology, its findings cannot be generalized to all similar situations. Additionally, a qualitative

research design is thought to be less scientific due to its interpretive and subjective nature. While this study offers no comparative value since it only examines the particulars of this specific incident, it can offer some insights into effective or ineffective methods of dealing with comparable crisis situations.

#### IV. ANALYSIS

Based on the principles of effective crisis communications outlined by the previously cited scholars (Benoit, 1997; Burnett, 1998, Higbee, 1992; Lesly, 1991; Marra, 1998; Murphy, 1996), this paper explores the United States Navy's handling of the crisis communication element of this accident. While there were numerous political, military and diplomatic aspects involved with the Greeneville/Ehime Maru collision, this paper will focus only on the performance of the Navy.

##### The Navy and Benoit's Image Restoration Techniques

Key elements of Benoit's (1997) image restoration strategy are the requirement to develop a crisis contingency plan and to have a designated spokesperson trained to respond prior to a crisis occurring. According to Commander Conrad Chun, a Navy public affairs officer working crisis communications during this incident, there were no specific plans in place for this type of crisis, however, many crisis communications plans have the same initial steps: notify appropriate leaders in the chain of command; initial release/response; maintaining a log of media queries; gathering as much info as possible and filtering out what's important (personal communication, January 24, 2003).

According to Werner (personal communication, November 20, 2002), due to the risks associated with being a war-fighting organization, the Navy has developed numerous crisis response plans that incorporate crisis communications into the scenarios.

Additionally, the Navy has trained public affairs specialists to provide crisis communications when the need arises. These specialists also conduct routine media training for senior officers so that they may be best prepared to respond to media questions in the event of a crisis.

Having a professional communicators and senior managers who are comfortable with the media was vital in how the service responded to the collision between the submarine and the Japanese fishing trawler. According to Commander Conrad Chun, a Navy public affairs officer working crisis communications during this incident, there were a number of "spokesmen" during the entire Greeneville incident (C.C. Chun, personal communication, January 24, 2003). "In the first days, Pacific Fleet took the vast majority of the media queries, with CHINFO [Navy Chief of Information Office] assisting from Washington, D.C. For specific media events, it all depended on location and specifically what we were releasing." Chun offered that spokesmen ranged from senior Admirals in the Pacific area of responsibility to junior public affairs officers in Washington D.C. For example, Commander Greg Smith, Navy public affairs officer working in Washington spoke with reporters about the submarine's search and rescue capabilities (Marquis, 2001) while Admiral Thomas Fargo, the Commander of the United States Pacific Fleet in Hawaii was quoted in The New York Times announcing that there would be an investigation (Jehl, 2001).

According to Werner (personal communication, November 20, 2002), the speed with which the crisis made headlines left little time for the Navy to react, forcing Navy public affairs specialists in Hawaii to focus almost exclusively on crisis management efforts for several weeks. The Navy's ability to quickly respond to media queries was in

keeping with Murphy's (1996) theory that early intervention is paramount if an organization wishes to positively influence public perceptions during a crisis. Werner issued an initial press release about the collision within one hour after the crisis and posted updated releases on the Pacific Submarine Command's website (D.E. Werner, personal communication, November 20, 2002). According to Chun (personal communication, January 24, 2003), many public affairs officers worked around the clock to provide what information they could to reporters. "Even when there wasn't much new information, we continued to field the calls through the night just to let reporters know that there was no new news."

In terms of Benoit's (1997) second recommendation, identifying the relevant audiences in the crisis situation, the Navy proved equally effective. Werner (personal communication, November 20, 2002), stated that the Navy first focused on the immediate demands in dealing with 400 resident media organizations who sought comment on the accident. Recurring themes during communications included sympathy, regret, thoroughness, and fairness to all involved. While responsiveness was deemed more important than identifying specific audiences in early hours, three specific audiences were identified within 24 hours of the start of the crisis. Werner stated that the identified audiences were: the American public; Japanese citizens, with a focus on the families of Ehime Maru crewmembers; and the Navy's internal audience

Benoit (1997) addresses the need for implementation of image restoration strategies and for making it known that actions are being taken to correct the problem. Utilizing the technique of mortification, Admiral Fargo quickly issued an apology to the Japanese people and passed on President Bush's condolences (Cushman, 2001).

Additionally, Admiral William J. Fallon, Navy's second-ranking officer, delivered a letter of apology from President Bush to Prime Min Yoshiro Mori and visited the families of nine people killed in the collision (French, 2001a).

Using another image restoration technique, the Navy promised corrective action by relieving the commanding officer of the submarine pending the results of investigations by the Navy and the National Transportation Safety Board (Cushman, 2001). The Navy also sought to reduce the offensiveness of the act by dedicating substantial resources in the recovery of the bodies from the Ehime Maru.

#### Dealing with Perceptions

In accordance with Murphy's (1996) chaos theory, the Navy's image was at risk at the onset of the crisis and continued as perceptions arose that the submarine did little to assist in the rescue efforts of the Japanese survivors (Marquis, 2001). The Navy's early response to media inquiries appeared to result in a balanced report of the accident and problems with the rescue effort. The New York Times' initial report quoted Commander Smith, stating that the Navy was hampered in assembling facts about the incident because rescuers were unable to speak Japanese. "There's a definite language barrier," Smith said (Marquis, 2001, para 8). Soon after, however, interviews with Japanese survivors created a negative perception as the Japanese reportedly asked why the submariners did not join directly in rescue efforts, particularly in the half-hour just after the sinking, before Coast Guard ships and aircraft arrived (Jehl, 2001).

This perception persisted over several days, requiring Navy officials to continually correct the record and explain how submarines are not well-suited to conduct

rescues at sea. Navy spokespersons said in reply that choppy seas, with waves of three to four feet and a six-foot swell, had made it too dangerous for the Greeneville crew to open hatches and take survivors on board (D.E. Werner, personal communication, November 20, 2002).

Rumors and speculation about the how the accident occurred began to appear in The New York Times. One veteran submarine commander, who asked not to be named, said in an interview that 16 guests crowded into the small control room could easily have distracted the Greeneville's top officers (Drew & Sterngold, 2001). "The senior supervisors maybe were paying too much attention to the V.I.P.'s and not enough to what was going on," he said. "I'm quite certain that was a factor" (para 19).

Murphy's (1996) chaos theory states that an organization will lose the opportunity to control events in a crisis if it waits too long to initiate communication with relevant publics. The proactive stance by naval spokespersons allowed the organization to avoid this possibility by initiating communication early and responding to rumors and speculation (D.E. Werner, personal communication, November 20, 2002).

The Navy crisis communicators were able to deal with media and pundit speculation effectively. This supports Marra's (1998) argument that organizational characteristics predict and explain crisis strategy effectiveness. The organization has in place a communication philosophy of "maximum disclosure with minimum delay" (D.E. Werner, personal communication, November 20, 2002).

Navy spokespersons also faced the strategic issues of time pressure, limited control and high uncertainty that Burnett (1998) states are characteristics of all crisis situations. But the Navy public affairs staffs were manned sufficiently to deal with only

routine public affairs business and dealing with an enormous crisis that required around the clock manning was an additional challenge (D.E. Werner, personal communication, November 20, 2002).

These challenges often resulted in delays in offering specifics of the crisis that were sometimes perceived as withholding information that negatively affected organizational credibility. An example would be the revelation by the media five days after the accident that two of the civilian visitors were actually at the controls of two important stations of the submarine when it hit the Japanese fishing vessel (Sterngold & Myers, 2001). This delay supports Higbee's (1992) argument that senior managers often desire to reserve comment until they have all of the facts during a crisis. The delay in revealing this information was widely reported in The New York Times and appeared to lessen the credibility of the Navy's message.

According to Chun (personal communications, January 24, 2003) many factors influenced the decision to not release this information. Key factors included: maintaining the integrity of the Navy investigation; the degree to which civilians actually had "control"; and the timing of the National Transportation Safety Board's (NTSB) investigation. As many parallel investigations were ongoing, the Navy did not want to appear to be getting out in front of the NTSB in releasing information (C.C. Chun, personal communication, January 24, 2003).

The Navy's effort in mitigating the reaction to this revelation was in keeping with Benoit's (1997) image restoration technique of promising corrective action. A February 16, 2001 The New York Times stated, "the Navy has tightened its rules on allowing civilians to participate in training exercises aboard submarines, at least until the

investigation into the sinking of a Japanese fishing trawler off Hawaii is completed" (Dao & Drew, 2001, para 1). Two weeks later, the newspaper reported that facing mounting criticism, the Secretary of Defense extended the ban to include all military equipment (Sciolino, 2001).

### Recovery Efforts

Burnett (1998) proposes that crisis resolutions have both short-term and long-term ramifications and the Navy was cognizant of both by preparing for the long-term crisis communication involved with recovery of the Ehime Maru, which was believed to be lying on the bottom of the Pacific Ocean in roughly 2,000 feet of water. They dispatched sophisticated underwater search equipment to Honolulu to search for the sunken vessel (Sterngold, 2001a) and announced a plan to explore the technical feasibility of recovering the remains of the trawler at the request of the Japanese government.

Proper handling of the recovery of the vessel, remains, and personal effects was paramount in respect to family members and U.S./Japanese relations (Blackburn, 2002). Over the next eight months, the Navy had a proactive, open communication policy regarding recovery efforts leading to the actual relocation of the Ehime Maru from 2000 feet of water to 115 feet of water by October 14, 2001 (J.J. Yoshishige, personal communication, November 23, 2002). The New York Times reported that the Navy succeeded in partly raising the ship in one of the most difficult and expensive recovery operations ever undertaken (Sterngold, 2001b).

The effort and resources expended in pursuit to recover the bodies of the Japanese fishermen helped mend relations between the two nations. The New York Times

reported that the \$60 million undersea recovery effort in which bodies of eight of nine victims were recovered, as well as other gestures, went a long way toward restoring good will (French, 2001b). In summing up the operation, Navy Rear Admiral William Klemm, director of the Ehime Maru Recovery Effort said those involved in the operation overcame significant technical difficulties in order to provide closure to the families of the missing crewmembers. “The gratitude they showed us justified the operation. We are pleased that we were able to recover the remains of eight crewmembers, but our prayers continue to be with the Mizuguchis (the family of the ninth missing crewmember) in their loss” (U.S. Pacific Fleet, 2001, para 17).

## V. DISCUSSION

This paper analyzed the crisis that the U.S. Navy faced after a submarine accidentally collided with a Japanese fishing trawler off the coast of Honolulu, Hawaii on February 9, 2001. After analyzing the crisis, this researcher concludes that the Navy conducted effective crisis communications with limited exceptions adhering to scholarly models of crisis communication and image restoration.

The Navy's crisis communication response were in keeping with the models proposed by scholarly literature (Benoit, 1997; Burnett, 1998, Higbee, 1992; Lesly, 1991; Marra, 1998; Murphy, 1996) by: acting quickly; naming spokespersons early; countering rumors and speculation; being open, honest and forthright in communications; and identifying key audiences.

Early intervention by Navy crisis communicators did much to enable the service to enact a measure of control during a volatile situation in which the organization's image was at risk. This supports Murphy's (1996) theory that early intervention is paramount if an organization wishes to positively influence public perceptions during a crisis and avoid losing control of the situation. In other words, early intervention helped the Navy avoid "chaos." According to Werner (personal communication, November 20, 2002), its quick response in the early hours of the crisis placed the Navy in a good position to be able to exert a measure of control during the volatile situation.

The Navy successfully followed Marra's (1998) model of strategic crisis communications by planning for the long-range aspects of the crisis while still heavily engaged with the short-term aspects of the crisis during early hours. The strategic plan to recover the trawler and the remains of those on board was communicated by naval officials early in the crisis.

The Navy used key elements of Benoit's (1997) image restoration strategy which were vital in the service's overall effectiveness. The organization had ingrained crisis communication into its organizational fabric. Part of this dynamic was the development of a core group of public affairs specialists equipped to provide proactive crisis communication when the need arises.

Based on information gained through interviews with Chun (personal communication, January 24, 2003), Werner (personal communication, November 20, 2002) and Yoshishige (personal communication, November 23, 2002), this researcher was able to determine that the Navy had significant crisis communications strategies in place prior to the collision of the USS Greeneville and the Ehime Maru. It was clear that the Navy's handling of the crisis presented sufficient evidence that the organization effectively integrated crisis management into its overall strategy.

The Navy also identified relevant audiences per Benoit's (1997) second recommendation. Ensuring that the organization communicated its actions to the American public, while not minimizing its responsibilities to Japanese audiences and organizational employees was a key aspect in the successful handling on the crisis.

The Navy effectively implemented image restoration techniques during the crisis per Benoit's (1997) recommendations. The first and most effective technique used by

Navy officials was mortification. Offering an apology to Japan and the families of those killed during the crisis was a powerful first step in restoring the Navy's tarnished image during the crisis.

The Navy was successful in adhering to another of Benoit's (1997) image restoration strategies of promising corrective action numerous times throughout the crisis. The first corrective action communicated was the removal of the commanding officer of the submarine immediately after the collision until an investigation could be conducted. The second promise of corrective action came when the Navy announced a halt to civilian embarks until the program could be reviewed.

The Navy also effectively used bolstering techniques during the crisis. The strategic commitment to recover the fishing trawler and the remains of nine fishermen still onboard from 2,000 feet of water was key in bolstering organizational image by expressing a sincere concern for the families of those who died in the collision. Japanese religious customs require that the bodies of those who have died be recovered and this commitment from the Navy in recovering the bodies helped repair its image with the Japanese people.

Despite largely effective crisis communications, the Navy did experience some setbacks during the crisis due issues of time pressure, limited control and the high uncertainty that Burnett (1998) discusses in his literature. When the media, and not the Navy, revealed that two of the civilian visitors were actually at the controls of two important stations of the submarine when it hit the Japanese fishing vessel, the Navy's credibility was questioned, placing the organization in a reactive posture for a degree of time before they could suitably recover.

Chun believes that Navy crisis communication efforts were successful in many areas, but could have been better in a few other areas. “[the Navy] publicly said that we should have disclosed sooner that civilians were at the controls but hindsight is 20/20. This was such a complex incident. . . I don't think there were many PAOs out there who could've anticipated the heavy media reaction to the discovery of that one fact” (C.C. Chun, personal communication, January 24, 2003).

## VI. CONCLUSION

This paper examined the importance of integrating crisis communication into organizational strategies as demonstrated in the case of the Navy's crisis stemming from the at-sea collision between a submarine and a civilian Japanese fishing trawler

The sea service's quick reaction to media inquiry and its communication philosophy of "maximum disclosure with minimum delay" served them well throughout the complicated and volatile situation. Despite the setback experienced after the media disclosure of civilians sitting at key control stations during the collision, the organization's use of image restoration strategies was effective in helping the Navy "weather the storm."

This case study is limited to the U.S. Navy's crisis communication response the Greeneville/Ehime Maru collision, however, what was studied here provides insight into how the effective use of crisis communication and image restoration techniques can benefit an organization facing a volatile crisis in which its image might be tarnished or destroyed.

Due to the scope of the crisis and the number of organizations involved, many elements could not be effectively explored within this paper. Additional elements that bear further analysis include the involvement by other agencies such as the State Department, the White House, the Department of Defense, the National Transportation

and Safety Board, and the government of Japan. In the future, it would be interesting to explore crisis communication issues from the diplomatic and political point of view.

## REFERENCES

- Banks, K. F. (1996). *Crisis communications: a casebook approach*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Benoit, W. L. (1997). Image repair discourse and crisis communication. *PR Review*, 23 (2), 177-187.
- Blackburn, T. M. (2002). The PR efforts behind raising the Ehime Maru. *Public Relations Tactics*, 9(3), 24.
- Burnett, J. J. (1998). A strategic approach to managing crises. *Public Relations Review* 24 (4), 475-489.
- CNN.com. (2001, April 25). Sub skipper's punishment too lenient, say families. Cable News Network Retrieved October 30, 2002, from <http://www.cnn.com>.
- Cushman, J. H. (2001, February 11). Sub in collision was conducting drill, Navy says. The New York Times. Retrieved October 22, 2002, from <http://www.nytimes.com>.
- Dao, J. & Drew, C. (2001, February 16, 2001). Pentagon bars civilians from submarine controls. The New York Times. Retrieved October 22, 2002, from <http://www.nytimes.com>.
- Drew, C. & Sterngold, J. (2001, February 15). Admiral who lost job set up civilians' submarine trip. New York Times. Retrieved October 22, 2002, from <http://www.nytimes.com>.
- Fink, S. (1986). *Crisis management: Planning for the inevitable*. New York: AMACOM,
- French, H. W. (2001a, February 28). U.S. admiral delivers apology to the Japanese in sub sinking. The New York Times. Retrieved October 22, 2002, from <http://www.nytimes.com>.
- French, H. W. (2001b, November 5). U.S. makes amends to Japan for sinking of ship. The New York Times. Retrieved October 22, 2002, from <http://www.nytimes.com>.

- Gilmore, G. (2001, April 25). Sub skipper reprimanded for Ehime Maru incident. American Forces Press Service. Retrieved from the World Wide Web October 22, 2002, from [http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Apr2001/n04252001\\_200104252.html](http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Apr2001/n04252001_200104252.html).
- Gunder, J. (2001, February 14). Submarine collides with fishing vessel, nine civilians missing at sea. Navy News Wire, Retrieved from the World Wide Web October 22, 2002, from <http://www.chinfo.navy.mil/navpalib/news/navnews/nns01/nns01008.txt>.
- Higbee, A. G. (1992). Shortening the crisis lifecycle: seven rules to live by. *Occupational Hazards*, 54 (10), 137.
- Kifner, J. (2001, April 24). Captain of sub is reprimanded and will quit. The New York Times. Retrieved October 22, 2002, from <http://www.nytimes.com>.
- Jehl, D. (2001, February 12). Clues sought in sub accident; some Japanese fault rescue. The New York Times. Retrieved October 22, 2002, from <http://www.nytimes.com>.
- Lesly, P. (1999). Policy, Issues, Crises, and Opportunities." *Lesly's Handbook of Public Relations and Communication* (4th ed.). New York. AMACOM.
- Marquis, C. (2001, February 10). 9 are missing off Pearl Harbor after U.S. submarine collides with Japanese vessel. The New York Times. Retrieved October 22, 2002, from <http://www.nytimes.com>.
- Marra, F. J. (1998). Crisis communication plans: poor predictors of excellent crisis public relations. *Public Relations Review* 24 (4), 461
- Murphy, P. (1996). Chaos theory as a model for managing issues and crises. *PR Review* 22 (2), 95-114.
- New York Times (2003). Audience & circulation. Retrieved March 21, 2003, from [http://nytadvertising.nytimes.com/adonis/html/aud\\_circ.htm](http://nytadvertising.nytimes.com/adonis/html/aud_circ.htm).
- Newsom D., Scott, A. & Turk, J. V. (2000). *This is PR: The realities of public relations* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Sciolino, E. (2001, February 24). Military in curb on civilian visits. The New York Times. Retrieved October 22, 2002, from <http://www.nytimes.com>.
- Seitel, F. (2001). Rudy Giuliani's crisis communications leadership. Retrieved from the World Wide Web October 30, 2002 [http://www.odwyerpr.com/archived\\_stories\\_2001/september/0917comm\\_seitel\\_rudy.htm](http://www.odwyerpr.com/archived_stories_2001/september/0917comm_seitel_rudy.htm).

- Sterngold, J. (2001a, February 13). Safety board tells of fight to survive sinking of fishing vessel hit by submarine. The New York Times. Retrieved October 22, 2002 from <http://www.nytimes.com>.
- Sterngold, J. (2001b, October 13). Navy's recovery effort begins for trawler sunk in accident. The New York Times. Retrieved October 22, 2002 from <http://www.nytimes.com>.
- Sterngold, J. & Myers, S. L. (2001, February 14). Civilians in sub sat at 2 controls when ships hit. The New York Times. Retrieved October 22, 2002, from <http://www.nytimes.com>.
- Truitt, R.H. (1993). The Wall Street Murder. In J. Gottschalk (Ed.), *Crisis response-inside stories on managing image* (pp. 277-287). Michigan: Gale Research Inc.
- U.S. Pacific Fleet Public Affairs (2001, November 25, 2001). Ehime Maru successfully moved to final relocation site. Retrieved from the World Wide Web March 25, 2003 at <http://www.cpf.navy.mil/CPFNEWS/0111recovery02.html>.
- Wimmer, R. D. & Dominick, J. R. (2000). *Mass media research: An introduction* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

## APPENDIX

The following questions were asked during the interview with three U.S. Navy public affairs officers who were involved with crisis communication efforts after the submarine, USS Greeneville, accidentally collided with the Japanese fishing trawler, Ehime Maru in February 2001.

1. What crisis management plans were in place at the Pacific Submarine Command and at Pacific Fleet Headquarters at to the time of the collision?
2. How long did it take to identify who had operational control of the crisis?
3. How long did it take to identify a spokesman for this crisis?
4. Why did it take five days to admit that two civilians were at the key controls of the submarine? Why was this fact not revealed by the Navy?
5. What were the key audiences targeted immediately after the crisis?
6. What were the key messages you wished to convey?
7. Do you think the crisis communication efforts were successful?
8. Would you have done anything differently?